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ABSTRACT

Instructors of speaking apprehension courses can get a better picture of how speaking apprehension "feels" by having their students create a visual representation of their fear. One instructor supplied her students with newspapers, magazines, comic books, construction paper, crayons, glue sticks, and small scissors and had them create speaking apprehension collages. The class was very receptive to the activity. After 20 to 30 minutes, students presented their collages to the class, and freely discussed their fears. The very diverse collages were collected for further study, and then returned to the students at the end of the course to show the students how much progress they had made. (RS)

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What is the Color of Apprehension? An Activity for a Speaking Apprehension Course

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Introduction

One of the early frustrations I developed when teaching the Speaking Apprehension course, was my inability to truly understand how speaking apprehension "felt" to each of my students. It seemed important for me to get a better picture of how my students experienced speaking apprehension so that I could address their concerns through materials and activities.

The majority of students in my class did not fit the stereotype of a person with speaking apprehension: shy and afraid to communicate in general. In fact, the students were interactive in class and quite interpersonally confident. It became difficult for me to help them pinpoint where their fear of public speaking took hold. I realized that if I was to be able to successfully work with this group, I would have to find a way to discover what each of their versions of apprehension "looked" like. As Triplett (1983) explains:

> "It seems logical on one level that if we experience stagefright and feel vulnerable, we must follow our instincts to protect ourselves. If we succeed, confidence should be ours; but such confidence rests on a very precarious level. We may show confidence on the outside but lack inner security because of the vicious circle we set up between vulnerability and protection. We never reach honest assurance (p. 9)."

In order to find this real assurance, Triplett recommends those suffering from apprehension give up their protective measures and enter the block of stagefright (p. 9). He explains that it is only through moving through this block that a person suffering from apprehension can find the new qualities on the other side of the block.

One way to move through the stagefright "block" is through the use of mental imagery, according to Triplett. In his sessions with clients, Triplett has asked them to "see" what stagefright looks like in their imagination:

> "I am always amazed at the rich variety of images that come up: a weight on the shoulders, a whirlwind, a green Martian, Mother, a fortress, a tank, a pointing finger, Daddy, Jell-O, a wavy yellow line -- the list could go on. Images do not have to be visual either. They can and do involve any of the five senses and perhaps a mood, emotion, or inner sensation. Being tense and spastic presents a graphic mental image, although not necessarily visual. Still, many are unaware of their images, even though they may hold a storehouseful (Triplett, p. 14)."

I felt the visualization session could be beneficial, but thought some students might be reticent to describing such personal emotions, particularly in front of a group. It was also possible that some of the students did not know themselves, what their apprehension "looked" like. Therefore, I decided to have the students provide me with a visual representation of their fear, as opposed to an oral description. I felt that coloring in the classroom might seem a bit unusual, but as McCroskey (1972) points out:

> "The Speech Communication profession has recognized for many years that normal classroom instruction does not provide sufficient assistance for many students to overcome their fear of communication transactions (p. 255)."

Activity

Prior to our next class meeting, I combed the supermarket for materials my students could use in creating their "speaking apprehension collages". I purchased construction paper, crayons, glue sticks, and small scissors. I also chose a variety of

magazines and newspapers from which the students could find images that related to their own brand of apprehension. I tried to select print sources that would lend themselves well to this type of exercise: "dark" comic books, magazines for weapons owners, tabloids, sports magazines, etc.

During the day we were to work on the collages, I introduced the topic of visualization by referring to the information the students had already read in the Triplett book on entering the stagefright block. As Triplett points out, accepting the block can be challenging because "stagefright produces a jumble of thoughts and feelings (p. 17)." However, getting to the other side of the block would be easier if we could better pinpoint the thoughts and feelings we might encounter on the way, claims Triplett.

I explained to the class that they would now try to create collages that would best represent what their own speaking apprehension resembled in their minds. We all moved over to a large table in the classroom where I had placed all the materials. Since there were a limited number of some of the supplies, students were expected to interact with each other during the exercise.

The class was very receptive to the activity, and took their task quite seriously. They all worked intensely on their projects, sharing clippings and art supplies. I found the students tended to bond more than they had in previous class sessions, due to the informality of this session. After 20-30

minutes, I asked each student to present their collage to the class. This presentation served as a way for the students to get a chance to finally verbalize their vision in front of others, as well as giving them an opportunity to deliver an impromptu speech.

The presentations went smoothly. Students felt comfortable discussing their fears in greater depth than they had previously, because they were able to refer to their "visual aids" while trying to explain their ideas to the group. As an instructor, I was struck by how diverse their collage images were. For example, one woman had included a photo of a person in a wheelchair on her page. She explained that suffering from speaking apprehension made her feel handicapped.

Another student had create a dark collage, filled with threatening and violent images. Yet another class member created a collage that focused on photos of men in extremely competitive sporting situations, such as mountain climbing and boxing. He explained that his speaking apprehension made him feel like he was trying to fight some insurmountable force.

Other interesting work included a woman who used crayon to draw bars across a photo of a person, to represent her feelings of imprisonment. And one of the collages I found most interesting featured a series of photos which showed a model demonstrating isometric exercises. At first glance I assumed that this student saw speaking as an exercise that involves facial expression. But then she explained to us that she always

felt like she appeared foolish and silly-looking when speaking, and the photos of the woman doing isometrics mirrored the way she felt she looked to others while giving a presentation.

Conclusion

Following the presentations from the group, we discussed how being able to talk about speaking apprehension was an important step in helping to alleviate its severity. I collected the collages so that I could study them later and therefore, learn more about my students as individuals.

At the end of the semester, I returned to class with the collages. After an end-of-semester pep talk and progress report, I pulled out the collages and presented them to each student. This group of students had made excellent progress during the course and I wanted them to have a "souvenir" of just how far they had come in such a short time. The students were able to use their collages as a reminder of how intense their fears were when they began the course. They were also able to see that their current fears were not nearly as strong as the ones depicted in the collages. In a way, the collages served as unofficial "diplomas" for the course.

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